

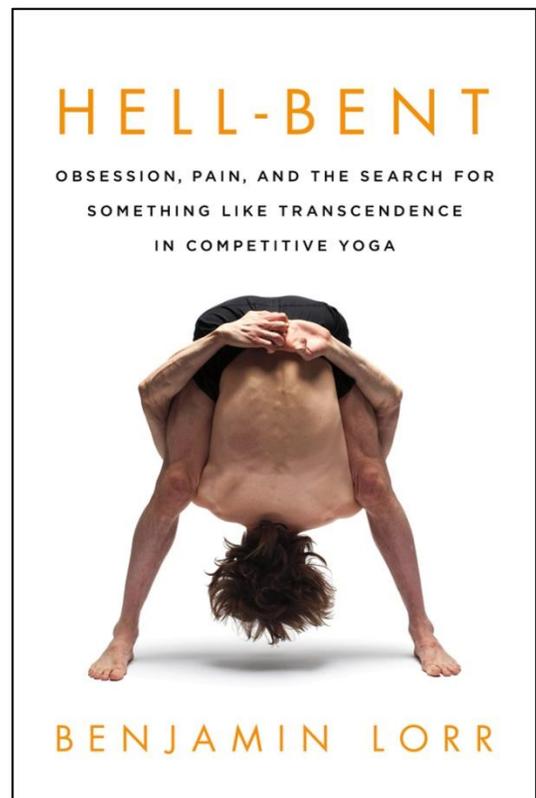
# READING GROUP GUIDE

## *Hell Bent*

*By Benjamin Lorr*

ISBN-13: 978-0-312-67290-4

ISBN-10: 0-312-67290-X



**About this Guide:** The following author biography and list of questions about *Hell-Bent* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *Hell-Bent*.

**About the Book:** In the early pages of *Hell-Bent*, author Benjamin Lorr describes yoga as “one of those things impervious to certainty, as incapable of corruption as it is of authenticity.” To one person, yoga might conjure up a studio and a sequence of prescribed postures. To another, it could represent contemplation, a union to the soul. But as Lorr notes, in its three thousand–year history, yoga has just as easily stood for the promise of clairvoyance, material gain, or the violent fusion of forces. It is a subject that defies easy definition. Or as the author says, “It is ten thousand rain droplets rather than one holy spring.”

It’s precisely that richness of meaning—yoga’s ability to comprise all these notions and more—that allows *Hell-Bent* to explore such a broad range of ideas while still being, unmistakably, a book of yoga. At the heart of the book lies a powerful story of personal transformation: Lorr went from skeptic to obsessive, undergoing changes





Image Credit Victoria Loustalot

both physical and spiritual, before he arrived at a satisfying balance. Along the way it introduces themes as far-reaching as the psychology of narcissism and the perception of pain. It introduces a world of competition that, to many readers, will feel miles away from their preconceptions of yoga—to some, something worse, a kind of corruption. And it introduces characters that defy belief, who have the power to both inspire and repel, often at the same time.

The journey, the pain, the surrender, the obsession. In his parting words, Lorr reminds us: “It’s all yoga after all.” *Hell-Bent* is a work of dogged reporting, a story of personal triumphs and tragedies, a portrait of unforgettable figures, a nation-spanning romp, and a celebration of what can be achieved when the human body is pressed to its absolute limit.

**About the Author:** BENJAMIN LORR graduated from Columbia University with a degree in environmental biology and creative writing. He lives in New York City and is currently at work on his second book. Visit Benjamin’s website <http://www.benjaminlorr.net/hell-bent/> for suggestions for further reading, extended interviews, photos and more.

**Praise for Hell-Bent:** “This extraordinarily thoughtful book stretches and reaches and bends in several seemingly impossible directions at the same time. It is at once a searching act of self-examination, a fascinating scientific investigation, a brave spiritual endeavor, and a fair-minded look at one of yoga’s most controversial icons. All in all, reading *Hell-Bent* makes for a wonderful, inspiring, maddening, complicated, edifying journey—and one that I was very happy to take.” —Elizabeth Gilbert, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Eat, Pray, Love*

“If, in addition to good health, yoga offers insight, then this might be the most thorough and honest book on the topic. *Hell-Bent* is a personal romp through a bizarre world, a clear-eyed exploration of the science of contorted bodies, and an unflinching exposé of a guru that finally leaves you asking: How do you judge the salesman when the snakeoil might actually work?” —Stefan Fatsis, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Word Freak* and *A Few Seconds of Panic*

“*Hell-Bent* is a compassionate, insightful exploration of the emotional and intellectual tug-of-war many of us have experienced in our yoga practice, revealing how we can fear and resent our most charismatic teachers—yet still be willing to follow them to the ends of the earth.” —Suzanne Morrison, bestselling author of *Yoga Bitch*



**Discussion:**

1. The book opens with the author stating “In many ways this is the story of a crack-up.” What is the “crack-up” at the heart of this story?
2. The author suggests that the “forceful fusing of opposites” is a crucial concept in hatha yoga. How is this idea – that one entity might contain opposing forces – echoed throughout the book?
3. How is the yoga during the Backbending/Jedi Fight Club sequences different from the yoga you practice? Did you notice any similarities or areas of overlap?
4. Bikram Choudhury is a man who has been quoted as saying: “Nobody loves himself more than I love myself. That is why I can love you all so much.” How does this take on his self-regard contrast or compare to the author’s description of Bikram as a pathological narcissist? Can you cultivate healthy self-love without courting destructive narcissism?
5. Copyrighting yoga has been controversial. Based on the information presented in the book, how do you feel about Bikram’s decision to copyright his yoga sequence?
6. In the text, the author describes Esak by saying “We stare at him a lot while we practice and he has to bear the weight of our stares.” According to Jimmy Barkan, Paramhansa Yogananda described the word guru as meaning *the weighted one*. What is the weight gurus carry? Is this an inherent part of being a guru, and what would it mean to be a guru without that weight?
7. Did the footnotes enhance your understanding of the book or of Yoga itself? What in the footnotes surprised or interested you?
8. Throughout the book, the author repeatedly uses the phrase “Courtney Mace style yoga competition.” What does he mean by this? How is Courtney Mace as a competitor different than, say, your typical high school track star? How realistic is it to believe that our competitive impulses can be channeled as per Courtney?
9. After reading the book, what do you think of USA Yoga’s stated goal to put “Yoga in the Olympics”?
10. Compare the author’s description of clinical narcissism on page 208 (“Indeed, in the most extreme cases, the world itself – the very fabric of reality – exists only as an extension of the self”) with his discussion of the interior quest of the hatha yogi’s on page 54 (“Yoga postulates an ‘in-stasy,’ a journey into ourselves, whereby... we become connected to the entire universe”). Do you think the “in-stasy” sought out by a strong yoga practice necessarily leads to narcissism? If



- not, what balances the practice? What prevents connecting with the self from leading to self-absorption?
11. The author relates several remarkable stories of people who have used the yoga to transform their lives. What role does transformation play in relation to Bikram's yoga? Consider Anna's description of her yoga practice in the endnote on 306: "My yoga integrates me. Healing is the idea that something needs to be fixed. Instead Bikram Yoga integrated me, I am still me – with all the pathetic parts – only better." Is this description of a yoga practice consistent with a yoga based around transformation?
  12. As described in the book, is Bikram Yoga a cult? What does it mean for it to be a "cult"?
  13. What does the title mean in relation to the book? Page 213 refers to "Just us, the hell-bent," who is this talking about? In this book, what does it mean to be "hell-bent"?
  14. What does *Hell-Bent* teach us about celebrity worship? How is Bikram Choudhury similar or different from other prominent charismatic "control freak" innovators such as Steve Jobs?
  15. In the final endnote on page 310, how does the author describe Bikram Choudhury? What type of peace – if any – has he come to both in terms of his relationship with the man and his yoga?

#### **A Conversation with Benjamin Lorr:**

*How and why did you start working on this book?*

Quite simply, after developing an almost addictive daily practice, a practice where I shed a little more than 65 pounds and reinvented my personality into someone who regularly used "juice" as a verb, one of my favorite yogis suffered a sudden stroke. This was a studio owner, healthy, wealthy, handsome, and wise, and it struck me hard: not unlike learning that your chess instructor was actually getting dumber for all the chess he was playing. Scales dropped. And I decided I wanted to learn more, not only from a health perspective, but also why this yoga compelled so many interesting intelligent people with such intensity.

*Did you have any interesting experiences where you were researching your book?*

Aside from the those detailed in the book (you know, competing in spandex in the national yoga competition, hallucinating from backbends, abandoning my life, girlfriend and job for a nine week training program that emphasized sleep deprivation), there were a few:



Approaching Bikram, on the last day of his Teacher Training to thank him for the experience and let him know I was the writer who was writing a book about his yoga (I had previously told both him and his publicist over email) – and watching him fly into a hysterical rage almost as soon as the words left my mouth: “You want to write about me??? \$10,000 dollars, right now! \$10,000 one word. You can’t write about me. Impossible. \$10,000 for this conversation!” All while jumping out of his seat, eyes in slits, screaming and waving his arms around. I turned and looked at everyone around me who was wondering what I possibly could have said to elicit this type of catastrophic reaction, mumbled something like sorry, think I’m gonna write it anyway, then turned and walked off as he continued ranting.

Doing “Guerilla Yoga” on the (relatively staid and conservative) streets of Charleston, SC and in front of Sunday shoppers in a shopping mall in Pennsylvania. Guerrilla Yoga is an attempt to bring yoga to unconventional places, awe people with difficult postures, and impress them with possibilities of the human body. Still pretty weird to be in the splits, in the middle of a shopping mall.

Being unexpectedly confronted with extremes of Bikram’s narcissism. Many interviews would start with – “this has to be off-record, but you need to know...” whereupon the interview subject would launch into an eventually predictable tale of being sexually harassed, financially cheated, or otherwise hurt by their relationship to Bikram. When beginning the book I don’t think I ever asked anyone about the negative aspects of their experience – but it kept coming up unsolicited.

*Was there anything unique or unusual about your writing process?*

Almost the entire book was written and edited in a green naugahyde booth at the Hudson Diner, a few blocks from my apartment in the West Village. I arrive early in the morning - eat eggs, whole wheat toast, and coffee – write until the early afternoon and always tip my servers well.

To have Benjamin Lorr call-in for discussion  
with your Reading Group contact

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Or visit the author’s website: <http://www.benjaminlorr.net/>

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